Spanish Cask Excellence

Now celebrating its 125th anniversary, the Rioja valley's Tonelería Murúa cooperage has been producing oak casks since 1898

After completing the most modern cooperage in Europe in 2021, the family-owned business Tonelería Murúa now produces 30,000 world-class casks a year. Its new facility prioritises sustainability: most power is now supplied by solar panels and sawdust is recovered for heating and energy regeneration. Now, the Tonelería Murúa team, led by fourth-generation CEO Elena Ceca Antón, is ready to move into the world of whisky.

"We have spent 125 years being a world-class producer of casks for wine and sherry. Over the last five years, we've also been working with spirits producers around the world, including in the U.S. and China," says Tonelería Murúa's commercial director Daniel Martinez Sampedro. "We're now ready to be the world's best provider of whisky casks."

The combination of the unique climactic conditions of the Rioja Valley, where two mountain ranges protect the area from extreme weather conditions, and the unique techniques used for air drying mean that few can match the quality of Tonelería Murúa's oak.

Ceca Antón is particularly proud of how her oak boards, which are naturally dried for a minimum of two years, are hand-stacked in a unique diagonal pattern just as in her grandfather's time. "It's not just the condition the oak was grown in that matters – the conditions in which it was dried can be just as important! By drying our oak in this tiled pattern, we ensure quality and consistency with our wood" she says. "For example, stacking boards in this way ensures that, when there's rain, excess unwanted tannins are washed off evenly across all our boards, and that there's an even distribution of sunlight and airflow throughout all our stacks."

Thanks to longstanding relationships, in some cases going back many decades, the cooperage has many sustainable sources of oak. In the U.S., most of Tonelería Murúa's timber suppliers are multi-generational family businesses themselves, encouraging greater trust between the partners and benefiting the cooperage's customers, too.

The cooperage is fully transparent about its many sources and ensures customers can find the perfect oak to mature their spirits. Tonelería Murúa's supply of American oak covers the length and breadth of the Appalachian mountains, from states including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, West Virginia, Indiana, and Kentucky. Meanwhile, the cooperage's European oak can come from Spain, France, Romania, and many other countries across the continent. A significant proportion of its European oak is PEFC-certified – a voluntary programme that ensures certified European forests are sustainably managed.

This page, clockwise: Tonelería Murúa, back in the late 19th century; Oak air drying; Toasting a cask; A cooper at work; Applying the hoop.

Innovation has also been a key part of Tonelería Murúa's development. It has pioneered a unique warm water immersion system for its oak boards which successfully helps rinse out excess unwanted tannins. Collaborating with local universities and Spain's INIA (Instituto Nacional de Investigacion y Tecnologia Agraria y Alimentaria), it has contributed to studies that include optimising natural oak drying techniques and analysing the organoleptic effects of toasting levels.

Most importantly, Tonelería Murúa has managed to be incredibly resilient in the face of a volatile market and has already built up a significant supply of casks. "Because we have such good relationships with many sherry producers, we have around 8000 casks that are currently being seasoned with fino, oloroso, and Pedro Ximenez sherry that could now be used for maturing whisky," says Ceca Antón.

Other issues can include fluctuating prices and uncertain or limited supply of oak. Martinez Sampedro promises this is not a problem: "Here at Tonelería Murúa, we can guarantee that we will never be short of oak. Because of our connections, our history, and our expertise, we always have access to the highest quality oak from anywhere that we need to get it. We are happy to always guarantee a steady supply of casks when you work with us."

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